

# Coming Into Focus

April 2019



GEORGIA VOCATIONAL  
REHABILITATION AGENCY

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# Refining Our Focus

By Executive Director Shawn Ryan

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Whether you have been paid to take pictures with professional grade equipment or your specialty is iPhone selfies and Instagram photos of the family pets, some basic principles of photography always apply. Lighting, distance and framing all impact how you see the subject. Even moving a step forward can momentarily blur your image before the camera acclimates to its altered surroundings and refocuses. So it is with organizational change.

I am in my second month with the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. Through meetings with leadership and conversations with field staff who have reached out, I have learned much about our functions and discovered other areas I still want to explore. My goal is to examine processes, procedures and structure to ensure that we are serving our clients and claimants to the best of our ability by maximizing every resource available.

Change of any kind is inherently uncomfortable, regardless of how positive the result. However, much like a photographer changing range or angle, we must be flexible and refocus. Like that photographer, my goal is not to change our "subject". We will always put our mission of employment and independence for Georgians with disabilities at the center of the shot. However, many of us will be required to approach processes differently, as we look through the lenses of accountability, efficiency and fiscal responsibility.

I am thankful for the opportunity to serve this noble mission and have already felt a welcome from many of you. I look forward to watching the full picture of our potential success come into focus.

Thank you for all that you do.

Shawn Ryan  
GVRA Executive Director



# Get to Know a Legislator

## This Month We Feature David Wilkerson

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David Wilkerson was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 2010 and serves the 38th District. A member of the House Leadership team, David is the Treasurer for the Democratic

Caucus. He actively serves on the Juvenile Justice, Retirement, Budget and Fiscal Affairs Oversight and Science and Technology committees. The son of Sergeant First Class Richard and Helen Wilkerson, David was born in Fort Dix, New Jersey. A product of public schools, David was an Eastman Kodak Scholar and graduated summa cum laude from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University with a degree in Accounting. After graduation, David moved to Cobb County to begin his professional career at the Big 4 accounting firm, Deloitte & Touche, where he earned his CPA credentials.

David's work in Georgia politics spans over 20 years. He has volunteered on numerous election campaigns and served in various leadership positions within the Democratic Party. David was a member of the State Committee for the Democratic Party of Georgia. In 2006, he was elected as Chairman of the Cobb County Democratic Party and was the first African American to serve in the position. For his dedicated work with the party, he received the Al Burruss

Hall of Fame award. Due to his devoted political involvement, David has been able to attend notable leadership conferences. In 2012, he was selected as the legislator to represent Georgia in the Emerging Leaders Program at the University of West Virginia. The program featured one legislator from each state. He also belonged to a select group of legislators from the House and Senate who were chosen as participants in the Georgia Legislative Leadership Institute at the University of Georgia.

His volunteer activities have included the Cobb Schools Foundation, the Floyd Middle School Foundation, the Russell Elementary School Foundation, Kennesaw State University Political Science Advisory Board, Junior Achievement, Osborne Community Coalition, Russell Elementary PTA and Dads Club, Cobb County Schools Facility and Technology Committee and serving on local non-profit boards. The Powder Springs Task Force and the Smyrna City Council have honored him with awards and recognition for his service.

Aside from his work in politics, business, and the community, David is a husband and father. He and his wife Penny have two children and reside in Austell. Their two children attend public schools in the South Cobb area where David and Penny are active volunteers. David and Penny served as Elders at their previous church, Calvary Presbyterian Church in Marietta. The family currently attends Macland Presbyterian Church in Powder Springs. David enjoys a variety of sports and coaches his son's youth soccer team.





# Gold Dome Wrap Up

## The 2019 Legislative Session Came to a Close

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Tuesday, April 2nd, was the 40th and final day of the 2019 legislative session. This year, a number of bills cycled through having a potential impact on state agencies like ours, or on the disability community at large.

To become law, a bill must have passed both chambers and receive the signature of the Governor.

Here's how some key legislation fared:

*HB 31* State budget and teacher pay raises - passed House and Senate - to be signed by Gov. Kemp

A BILL to be entitled an Act to make and provide appropriations for the State Fiscal Year beginning July 1, 2019, and ending June 30, 2020; to make and provide such appropriations for the operation of the State government and its departments, boards, bureaus, commissions, institutions, and other agencies, for the university system, common schools, counties, municipalities, and political subdivisions, for all other governmental activities, projects, and undertakings authorized by law, and for all leases, contracts, agreements, and grants authorized by law; to provide for the control and administration of funds; to provide an effective date; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*HB 68* Allows the state to pay for private school tuition - passed House and Senate - on Gov. Kemp's desk

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Chapter 2A of Title 20 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to student scholarship organizations, so as to prohibit certain entities from being student scholarship organizations; to provide for

related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*HB 213* Allows farmers to grow hemp for CBD oils and other products - passed House and Senate - on Gov. Kemp's desk

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Title 2 of the O.C.G.A., relating to agriculture, so as to enact the "Georgia Hemp Farming Act"; to provide for unlawfulness of certain acts; to authorize certain academic research of hemp; to provide for licensing and permit requirements for hemp growers and hemp processors, respectively; to provide for the Department of Agriculture to enter into agreements regarding such testing and other matters; to amend Part 1 of Article 2 of Chapter 13 of Title 16 of the O.C.G.A., relating to schedules, offenses, and penalties regarding regulation of controlled substances, so as to revise the definition of the term "marijuana"; to provide an exception to the scheduling of tetrahydrocannabinol and tetrahydrocannabinolic acid as controlled substances; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*HB 321* Extends the "Provider Fee" funding hospitals that treat Medicaid patients, and adds new transparency requirements for nonprofit hospitals - passed House and Senate - on Gov. Kemp's desk

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Article 6C of Chapter 8 of Title 31 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to the hospital Medicaid financing program, so as to extend the sunset provision; to provide for an effective date; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.



*HB 323* Would require pharmacy benefit managers to report to the state the amount of rebates they pocket and the amount they transfer to patients. - passed House and Senate - on Gov. Kemp's desk

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Chapter 64 of Title 33 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to regulation and licensure of pharmacy benefits managers, so as to add a definition; to revise provisions relating to administration of claims by pharmacy benefit managers; to revise provisions relating to prohibited activities of pharmacy benefits managers; to provide for an effective date and applicability; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*HB 324* Permit medical marijuana growing, manufacturing, testing and distribution at dispensaries - passed House and Senate - on Gov. Kemp's desk

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Chapter 12 of Title 16 of the O.C.G.A., relating to offenses against public health and morals, so as to provide for the production, manufacturing, and dispensing of low THC oil in this state; to provide for an exception to possession of certain quantities of low THC oil; to amend Chapter 11 of Title 2 of the O.C.G.A., relating to seeds and plants generally, so as to provide for an exception; to provide for related matters; to provide for a short title; to provide for legislative findings; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*HB 426* Hate crime bill that gives sentencing guidelines for anyone convicted of targeting a victim based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, mental disability or physical disability - passed House, not heard in Senate

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Article 1 of Chapter 10 of Title 17 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating

to procedure for sentencing and imposition of punishment, so as to revise the criteria for imposition of punishment for crimes involving bias or prejudice; to revise the sanctions for such crimes; to provide for the manner of serving such sentences; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*SB 48* Mandate dyslexia screening in schools and provide for teacher training - passed House and Senate - on Gov. Kemp's desk

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Title 20 of the O.C.G.A., relating to education, so as to provide for identification of and support for students in pre-kindergarten through second grade with dyslexia; to provide for definitions; to require the Department of Education to make a dyslexia informational handbook available to local school systems; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

*SB 56* Aims to stop surprise billing at hospitals - passed Senate, not heard in House

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Title 33 of the O.C.G.A., relating to insurance, so as to establish standards for carriers and health care providers with regard to payment under a managed care plan in the provision of emergency medical care; to provide for applicability; to provide for definitions; to provide for certain patient or prospective patient disclosures; to provide for insurer disclosures; to provide for requirements regarding the provision of emergency medical care for covered persons under a managed care plan; to provide for requirements for managed care plan contracts between carriers and covered persons; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.



*SB 106* Gov. Kemp's bill allowing him to request a Medicaid waiver and an ACA insurance market waiver from the federal government - passed House and Senate - signed by Gov. Kemp

A BILL to be entitled an Act to amend Article 7 of Chapter 4 of Title 49 and Title 33 of the O.C.G.A., relating to medical assistance and insurance, respectively, so as to authorize the Department of Community Health to submit a Section 1115 waiver request to the United States Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; to authorize the Governor to submit a Section 1332 innovation waiver proposal to the United States Secretaries of Health and Human Services and the Treasury; to provide for implementation of approved Section 1332 waivers; to provide for expiration of authority; to provide for legislative findings; to provide for related matters; to provide for a short title; to

provide for an effective date; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

If you have any questions about any of these pieces of legislation, please contact GVRA Legislative Liaison Charlie Miller at [Charlie.Miller@gvs.ga.gov](mailto:Charlie.Miller@gvs.ga.gov).

# Congratulations!

## Let's Hear it for the Recent DAS Trainees

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Please join us in congratulating the following Disability Adjudicator Trainees who successfully completed Adjudicator Basic Training (ABT) here at DAS:

### Dalton

Kimberly Ryan  
Nadine Talbot

### Stone Mountain

DaJuana Barnett  
Jada Browne  
Kowanna Clemons  
Sherisse Edmead

Jocelyn Marshall  
Tekari Matthews  
Cesalee Morrow  
Assyria Reynolds

Congratulations on a job well done, and if you see any of these people, please let them know how proud you are of their accomplishments.



# A Childhood Triumph Revisited

## Sen. McConnell Visits RWS

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The old adage, translated into countless inspirational memes, says you never know who any child might grow up to be. When two-year-old Mitch McConnell, a toddler with polio from Alabama, arrived at Roosevelt Warm Springs in 1944, his mother had no political aspirations for her young son. Her only hope was to see her child rehabilitate enough to get around with leg braces.

Today, Senate Majority Leader McConnell (R-Kentucky) still recalls parts of his therapeutic experience as an outpatient. He often speaks of the vigorous exercises his “drill sergeant mother” helped him perform in order to strengthen his left leg and improve his coordination. The Senator says one of his earliest memories was his very last therapy appointment at Roosevelt Warm Springs. That’s the first time he heard a nurse tell his mother words she had prayed to hear throughout two years of treatment: her then four-year-old son was going to recover.

Over seven decades after his time as a patient came to an end, the Majority Leader walked the halls of the campus that aided his recovery. His gait strong and steady, he explored the campus’s architectural crowning glory. Flanked by a few close Senate staffers, New York Times reporter Jonathan Martin and a small contingent from the agency itself, he began his tour at the historic Georgia Hall, the most iconic of Roosevelt Warm Springs’ buildings. His tour, led by long-time campus historian Linda Creekbaum, navigated through the quadrangle and into the library, where Creekbaum showed him multiple pieces of medical equipment, wheelchairs and leg braces decades old, and photographs from the period when he attended. Before

whisking the Majority Leader away to the Little White House, campus director Dr. Lee Brinkley Bryan surprised Mr. McConnell with a glimpse into his own personal past.

Campus archivist, Mike Shadix, managed to locate the original registration card which processed young McConnell as a patient. Visibly moved, the Majority Leader asked for copies to take with him, which were promptly produced in a simple white envelope.

His campus tour ended at the Little White House museum, adjacent to the home where founder President Franklin Delano Roosevelt lived during his stays and also where he ultimately passed away in 1945. Dr. Bryan remarked on how honored the campus’s many staff were that the Majority Leader made a few hours during a busy Georgia swing to visit Warm Springs. “We could not be more appreciative of the Majority Leader’s interest and support of our ongoing work here,” she said. “I am thankful that we impacted his life in a small way and appreciate his ongoing interest in the campus.”

“We wanted to make the afternoon personal and meaningful for him,” said Shawn Ryan, the Executive Director of Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, which oversees Warm Springs. “Any time the Majority Leader would like to return, we will be truly honored to host him as a distinguished guest. Once at Roosevelt Warm Springs, you remain part of the family and the legacy.”







U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell visited Roosevelt Warm Springs in March. As a boy, he was a patient at the RWS hospital where he received treatment for polio.



# Inspiring Others Who Came After One VR Client's Amazing Story

By Communications Manager John Peyton Boan

## Part 1

Jan and Ernest Taylor had been in their Newnan home for only a few days when their middle child Emily became sick. She had an ear infection, not uncommon for a two year old, and while Emily was feverish and oddly pale, no one found her symptoms especially alarming. After a brief examination, a local pediatrician sent the family home with a prescription for an antibiotic and an appointment for a follow up visit the next week.

In the days that followed, Jan and Ernest threw themselves into adjusting to their new home and their new lives in Newnan. Jan would stay at home with the kids. Ernest was working to get an executive research firm off the ground. On top of adjusting to the changes of scenery and the ever-present strain of having three children under the age of six, the 1903 plantation house they had purchased was in desperate need of renovations. Sitting squarely in the historic downtown district, the house had previously been partitioned into three separate apartments, and converting it back into its single-family form was not a small undertaking.

The morning of April 11, 1977 was not anything out of the ordinary. While Ernest watched Emily's sisters—Jill Faith and Natalie, who was celebrating her first birthday that day—Jan walked with Emily the two blocks to the pediatrician's office. The antibiotics had done their job, and Emily's ear infection was gone, but the doctor, concerned that Emily's color still hadn't returned, ordered a routine blood test. Someone from his office would call with the results after lunch. Jan and Emily walked home happy.

Around noon, the phone rang. It wasn't a nurse calling as Jan believed it would be. Instead, the doctor voiced the young family's worst fear. Emily was very sick. She had leukemia, putting her white blood cell count well above normal levels and her red blood cell count so low she was at risk for heart failure.

Ernest was sitting at his office desk—a card table in a largely unfurnished room above the Fischer Insurance Company—when his phone rang. Jan told him the news, and he rushed home. She met him at the door, and they cried on the couch, talking at length about what they would do next. They knew that whatever they decided would likely have a lasting impact on Emily and their family for the rest of their lives.

Having hailed from Tennessee, both Ernest and Jan were familiar with St. Jude's Children Hospital in Memphis, and, fortunately, Emily met the hospital's one treatment requirement: she hadn't received any past treatment. The problem then was that Emily wasn't well enough to travel to Tennessee. She needed a blood transfusion, a lengthy process for someone so young, and she needed the process to start as soon as possible.

Calls were made to family friends, arrangements for babysitters hashed out, and while Jan was left to pack for the trip, Ernest drove to the hospital, his middle child in the seat beside him.

That night, Jan sat on the edge of Jill Faith's bed and told her that Emily was very ill and needed to go to a hospital in Tennessee.

"Is Emily going to die?" Jill Faith asked, her



blue eyes beginning to gloss with tears. Jan said she didn't know but she hoped not. She asked her oldest child to help with her youngest sister while her parents were away, and the young girl nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation as much as a five year old can.

The transfusion would last through the night, and by early morning it became a question of whether the family would arrive in time for their flight. By the time Emily and Ernest arrived back at the house, a police escort to the airport had been arranged, and with Ernest burning custom rubber, the caravan set out to Hartsfield Jackson, the blue lights and sirens in front of them serving as a public notice that what was happening was nothing short of an emergency.

With that same sense of urgency, Emily, Jan and Jan's best friend, Jean Eickhoff, made their way through the terminal and to their gate. Only after they explained that Emily's illness wasn't contagious did the pilot allow them to board the plane. Emily was wearing pink footed pajamas.

From the airport, the group was shepherded into a car and rushed to the hospital where they were rushed through the registration paperwork, and from there, Emily was rushed through an admittance exam. After all, there was little doubt she needed to be there, and everyone involved understood that time was of the essence. During this early testing, which included a series of vaccines and blood work, Emily was given a stuffed dog. She named him Patrick, and even now, more than 40 years after the fact, Emily still has Patrick.

The patient rooms at St. Jude were built to limit the spread of infection, though the structure of the rooms themselves has most assuredly changed since the late 1970s. Each patient's room was isolated from the others, with a constant stream of purified air being pumped into each room individually.

Imagine a square donut with the center being the nurses' station, which was the only entrance to the patient rooms that surrounded it. On the outside of each patient's room was a smaller room not unlike a windowed closet. The only entrance to these rooms was from an outside hall. Because of the fear of infection, there was no way that a parent could be in the room with their child. It would be 10 days after Emily was admitted before Jan could touch her child again, the two separated by pane of shatter-proof glass.

During those 10 days, Jan was told multiple times that Emily's blood cell counts were so abnormal that she could conceivably die at any moment. But each moment passed like the one before it, and Emily grew stronger, her counts normalizing, the treatment doing what it was supposed to do.

After a week and a half, she was released from the hospital. Everyone was, of course, overjoyed, but like all things, that relief was temporary. After only six hours outside of the hospital, Emily took a turn for the worse, and she was rushed back to St. Jude.

Experimental treatments were presented and considered. Every day was a struggle that brought little, if any, improvement, Jan taking up a sort of protracted residence in the windowed closet that adjoined Emily's room.

Trusting in their faith and the work of the medical staff who attended to Emily, Jan and Ernest were left with little to do but to wait. On the fifth night after Emily's re-admittance, she began to complain of pain in her stomach and her limbs. Everyone feared for the worst. It's a little known fact that children don't typically experience the kind of pain associated with chemotherapy that often afflicts adults. Emily's pain, then, was initially thought to be internal bleeding, an almost assuredly fatal diagnosis for someone so young. When the nurses told Jan this news, they were crying. Emily's





doctor, though, was more optimistic, attributing the pain to her chemo treatments. It wasn't unheard of, after all. Emily was given Tylenol, and that night, she slept soundly.

The next day, Jan noticed something different about her daughter, something inextricable that she couldn't quite place. The lab techs ran blood tests. Emily ate a large breakfast. Everyone waited. And then, nothing short of a miracle. Emily's blood cell counts had made drastic improvements. Several days before Mother's Day, Emily's doctor said she could go home. Over the years, she would be back to St. Jude roughly 100 times for treatment, and afterward, she would go back home to Newnan. Of the 13 children on Emily's wing during her initial stay at St. Jude, she would be the only child who would go back home again.

## Part 2

Call it fate or chance or providence, but Emily's impact on St. Jude would become as indelible as St. Jude's impact on Emily. Knowing the role that St. Jude played in Emily's recovery, Ian Dickson, a family friend who worked at a national advertising agency reached out to the hospital, offering to develop promotional materials free of charge. As part of that, Ian set himself to developing a new logo, and what image to best demonstrate the hospital's legacy than a picture of Emily herself? Working with a photo of her in profile, her dark hair beginning to return, Ian developed a logo with her silhouette in crimson. The logo is still in use to this day.

More than any one image, though, either digital or print, Emily herself is a lasting marker of the work done at St. Jude with each step she takes and each breath she draws. Because it is fate and chance and providence—and the wonders of medical science—that has put her where she is today and informed so much of her character. She was married several years ago to a man she met at a prom event

specifically for people with disabilities. She has friends and family who care about her tremendously, and a person spending any amount of time with Emily would certainly leave the interaction with the takeaway that she not only cares about people but wants to help them. If you ask her, she'll tell you just this, that if it were up to her, she would work in a nursing home or assisted living facility, doing for others what they can no longer do for themselves.

To this end, Emily needs a bit of help herself. While the treatments she received at St. Jude were nothing short of life saving, they nonetheless took a toll on her young body, resulting in low-level trauma to her brain. This left her with development delays that still impact her cognitive reasoning and the length of time it takes her to complete certain tasks, making it difficult for her to find and maintain work.

Emily and her family took a big step in getting her help when they, several years ago, reached out to the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency—a state of Georgia government agency that helps individuals with disabilities find and maintain work. In addition to a host of other training and job readiness services, GVRA recently contracted with a job coach to help Emily overcome the remaining barriers between her and a career in an assisted-living community.

And Emily is committed to making this dream a reality. In many ways, she started the journey to where she is today more than 40 years ago, and despite a set of hurdles that tested her family's faith and the capabilities of her two-year-old body, she remains steadfast that she was put in this world for a reason. That reason is to help others, and more than a picture of a young girl or a logo that was modeled after that picture, the spirit of service that exist within Emily has and will remain an enduring reminder of what can be accomplished. She is living proof of this.





Emily Taylor Stearn stands with her parents, Ernest and Jan Taylor, in her childhood home. Following her treatment at St. Jude Children's Hospital in Tennessee, an image of Emily would become what is now the St. Jude's logo.



# Dedication Recognized

## Honoring Longtime RWS Employees

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At Roosevelt Warm Springs, tradition is enmeshed in the very fiber of the campus and its people. Part of its sprawling 940 acres, founded in 1927 by future president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, stand strikingly unchanged over the span of decades, their historic significance accented by the modernity of newer structures erected to help today's students compete in an ever-evolving workforce. Yet, while the career goals and expectations of the center's mostly transition-age clients keep pace with contemporary culture, some campus customs remain untouched by time.

The Annual Employee Recognition Ceremony, in its 92nd year, is one such tradition. Sponsored by the Roosevelt Warm Springs Development Fund Board, the event honors top performers, and over the years, has added milestone recognitions for employees with significant tenures.

Police Lt. Morreese Horton, known to his colleagues as Mo, joined the Roosevelt Warm Springs Police Department in 1988 fresh out of military service. During the ceremony, Dr. Lee Brinkley Bryan, Director of Residential and Transition Services, and Faye Perdue, Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board member, honored Mo for three decades spent protecting the campus and its students.

"The family values we all have, that's the most important thing since I've been here that make it worthwhile," said Horton. "We also get to interact with the students, and that's great. We train some of them how to do dispatches. How to write things down, how to answer the radio. And you get to watch them grow and develop."

Tina McClendon, Admissions Department

Customer Service Specialist, also recently celebrated the 30 year mark. She was partially drawn to the campus because of a family history, but over the past three decades, her colleagues have also become much more than work associates.

"Being from this area and knowing the history... my grandfather worked here. My mother worked here briefly. My grandfather was a supervisor of maintenance and so I came here as a child. We would eat lunch here on Sundays, and I would come here when my grandfather would do the movies for patients right here in this auditorium," reminisced McClendon. "Every department that I've been in, it always feels like family."

Dr. Bryan acknowledged the significance of traditions like the Employee Luncheon.

"It is so important for us to come together and take a time out to thank our coworkers... and friends... for all they do every day for the students and for each other," she said from the podium. "There's such a rich legacy here, and it's made possible by the people who give so much."

In addition to service milestones, the ceremony also honored the 2019 Leadership Award Winner, Lois Williams, and the 2019 Employee of the Year Deborah Whitten. Perdue, a former RWS employee, delivered the keynote speech.

Here's the full list of honorees:

### 30 Years

Morreese Horton  
Tina McClendon

### 25 Years

Clara Chaney



### 20 Years

Lynn Betts  
Robert Burbank  
Jeff Goodin

### 15 Years

Rosemary Johnson  
Kim Lawson  
Jesse O'Neal  
Lynne Patterson  
Lee Snelling  
Reenae White

### 10 Years

Gary Bradley  
Tammy Howe

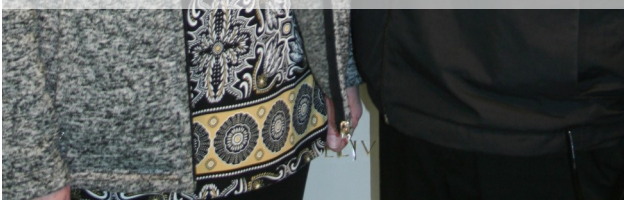
Robin Pynenburg  
Deisy Saumell  
Quardez Warrior

### 5 Years

Aron Lewis  
Imogene Mahone  
Brandy Morphy  
Jorge Navarro  
Kelli Sanders  
Mitch Sanders  
Krystal Whitten



RWS recently honored longtime employees at a special luncheon. Pictured left are Tina McClendon and Morreese Horton who have worked at RWS for 30 years. Pictured right is Clara Chaney, who has been with the organization for 25 years.



# GIB Staff Get National Nod

## Employees Nominated for National Award

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Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB) employees of the year, Torri Phifer and Jared Sims, have each been nominated for a national award and will be recognized for their accomplishments during the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) National Symposium to be held in May of this year in Arlington, Virginia.

NIB, who coordinates efforts between associated agencies and the federal government to create and sustain employment and career opportunities for people who are blind, has established two prestigious national awards.

Torri, trade labor worker at the Bainbridge plant, is GIB's nominee for the Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Direct Labor Award. This award is named after the late Dr. Salmon, one of the nation's outstanding advocates for people who are blind.

Torri, a critical team member on the GIB production floor, has been contributing to the production of quality goods in various departments for the past 13 years. Throughout her tenure at GIB, Torri has consistently completed tasks in an outstanding manner. Torri has been cross-trained to operate a number of machines including: the Prong and Creaser and to fill in on various positions in the pillow room.

Torri, a native of Florida, was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) when she was in 2nd grade. However, her visual challenges never stopped her from dreaming of having a job, starting a family or owning a home. Torri was 22 when she was able to fulfill her dream of being employed when she landed her first job at GIB. This allowed her to qualify for a loan and fulfill another of her dreams of owning

a house. "I could not believe it," she said. "I was only working like for 3 years, and thanks to the stability of working at GIB, I was given a loan and built my dream home from the ground up."

In the past 13 years, Torri has been assigned to various departments including pillows, paper products and file folders. Her supervisor, Dawn Womble, said, "Torri is a friend to all who know her. She will do anything to help her fellow workers, all with a laugh and smile on her face."

For Torri, the positive feeling she gets from her work makes her very proud. "it is good to know I am supporting the efforts of the military, state and many other customers by what we do out here at GIB," she said.

Jared Sims, Call Center Supervisor at the Bainbridge facility, is GIB's nominee for the Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award. This award is named after the late Dr. Samuelson, a leader in upward mobility and placement programs for people who are blind.

For the past three years, Jared has built a reputation of trust, integrity and innovation in his role as Call Center Supervisor for both the Lead Generation and the Intake units. Jared, native of El Paso, became visually impaired as an adult due to Stargardt, a condition which took his central vision in a matter of days.

"It happened so fast," he said. "One day I am at the eye doctor getting my new contacts, and the following week, I walk outside my house, look straight ahead and could not see my truck where I had parked it. I got chills down my spine thinking it had been stolen. As I looked left and right, my





truck would appear and disappear. I knew something was really wrong."

Jared approached his local Vocational Rehabilitation office to request services. There, he learned about GIB. Soon enough, a position came open at the GIB plant located in Griffin, where Jared started his career as a Sewing Machine Operator. He was cross trained on various machines including the Heat Transfer Machine, Gerber Cutter and the J-spoon and Tri-pack machines. After three years, Jared moved his family to Bainbridge where he continued to excel in the Sewing Department. Six

months later, an opportunity opened up for a Call Center Supervisor and like they say, the rest is history.

"One of the things I like most about working at GIB is when I am able to talk to an individual who is at a point where I was many years ago, and I can share all the resources and services available and help them open their mind to all the possibilities," he said. "That is a great feeling."

## Calendar of Events

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**New Hire Orientation** - April 9-10, 2019 - Initial orientation and onboarding for new hires across all nine administrative offices and all five programs.

**Certified Public Manager Program** – April 9 - 11, 2019 - Macon, GA - Nationally recognized and accredited management development program. In partnership with the University of Georgia, the CPM is designed to improve managers skills in delivering quality services and improving the lives of our clients.

**Executive Leadership Development Program** – April 23-24, 2019 – Atlanta, GA - Designed for individuals interested in pursuing future leadership roles within the organization. This is module 3 and will focus on interpersonal and organizational communications

**Job Readiness Workshop Series for Veterans with Disabilities** - April 24-25, 2019 - College Park, GA - T.E.A.M. 26 is partnering with GDOL to host the upcoming Job Readiness Workshop Series for Veterans with Disabilities (flyer is attached). These series of workshops will last two days: Wednesday,

April 24th and Thursday, April 25th, 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Lunch will be provided. The Veterans who attend will receive training in creating a resume, interviewing skills, mock interviews, networking, VA claims & appeals, SSA benefits, Veterans court/employer background checks and federal bonding. This event will end with a job fair, with several employers on-site. The event will be held at Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, 1630 Phoenix Boulevard, Suite 101, College Park, Georgia 30349, and is on Marta's bus route.

**State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Meeting** - April 24-25, 2019 - Macon, GA - Those interested in making public comment should contact Michele Mason, GVRS Board and Council Liaison, at [Michele.Mason@gvs.ga.gov](mailto:Michele.Mason@gvs.ga.gov).

**Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) April Meeting** - April 25-26, 2019 - Macon, GA - Those interested in making public comment should contact Michele Mason, GVRS Board and Council Liaison, at [Michele.Mason@gvs.ga.gov](mailto:Michele.Mason@gvs.ga.gov).



# GVRA Hires and Retirements

## Both a Welcome and Bon Voyage

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We have a new slate of coworkers who recently started with GVRA. Please take the time if you see the following people to make them feel welcome and let them know you're glad they're a part of the team.

LaToya Phillips (RWS), Barbara Britt Bowling (RWS), Patricia Burns (RWS), Phebius Devert Smith (Business Applications), Eve Harrell (VR Dublin), Ashley Butler (VR Atlanta), Ali Hartman Duck (VR Columbus), Manju Goel (VR Cumming), Jennifer Marie Hollman (VR Athens), Morgan Daniel (VR Columbus), Edmond Walker Green (VR Columbus) and Shamyia Evans-Patrick (VR Newnan).

In addition, VR saw several notable recent retirements including Andrew Hughlett III, Paul Raymond and Anita Coney.

Anita (pictured bottom right) has worked for the State of Georgia for 33 years and the last 23 years for GVRA. Anita always put the clients first, has a strong knowledge of VR Policy and Procedure and has a common sense approach to developing or modifying processes to be more efficient. Anita always conducted herself in a professional manner and had high expectations for herself and her staff. She would cover the front desk so staff could enjoy office events and perform any task on her team to get the job done.

Paul (pictured top right) began his career in Maine working with people with developmental disabilities and people with vision loss. Paul moved to Georgia in 2008 to develop a comprehensive rehabilitation program for Georgians with vision loss. Since then, Paul has helped to improve services and outcomes for the clients he served. Paul plans to kick off his retirement by traveling with his wife of 40 years.

Happy trails to those retiring!





# Demystifying Loss

## Sensory Services Training a Success



In March, GVRA's Sensory Services Unit implemented a Seven-Module Training Series titled "Demystifying Vision Loss" and "Demystifying Hearing Loss." The purpose of the training was to provide staff with the skills they needed in order to better serve our specialty populations.





**2-Day Intensive  
JOB READINESS WORKSHOP SERIES  
FOR  
VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES**

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 24, 2019 and THURSDAY, APRIL 25, 2019  
9:00 am – 3:00 pm**

**Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency  
1630 Phoenix Boulevard, Suite 101  
College Park, Georgia 30349**

**TO REGISTER FOR THIS FREE EVENT PLEASE CALL 470-273-2685 OR EMAIL  
DENISE.MILLS@GVS.GA.GOV  
(LIMITED SPACE AVAILABLE)**

**Presented By:**



**Workshop will cover:**

- ▶ **How to Build a Professional Resume**
- ▶ **How to Ace an Interview**
- ▶ **Mock Interviews**
- ▶ **Networking**
- ▶ **VA Claims & Appeals**
- ▶ **SSA Benefits**
- ▶ **Veterans Court / Employer Background Checks**
- ▶ **Federal Bonding**

**\*This Event will end with a Job Fair, with Several Employers On-Site\***

**\*\*\*\*Lunch Provided\*\*\*\***

# A Profound Truth in Culture

## By Deputy Executive Director Kevin Harris

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When I arrived as the Legislative and Communications Director in 2012, GVRA had just separated from a different state agency, and its administrative functions in Atlanta were in their infancy. There was much to do, and each day seemed to be another opportunity for a new challenge to emerge. During the initial months, learning about our programs and the people we serve provided a unique opportunity to concentrate on the vision of who we are and what we do. By using that prism, the importance of not only what *what* we do but *why* we do it has remained the driving force for me personally.

Last year, we engaged Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVIOG) in a contract that resulted in the creation of values, goals and objectives. During a three-day retreat, Agency and VR Leadership identified five values: Clients, Coworkers, Leadership, Compliance and Budget.

We value **clients** by providing services that result in employment outcomes and career opportunities.

We value **coworkers** who demonstrate integrity and excellence in performance, and who are passionate about creating a positive client experience and strong outcomes.

We value **leadership** that demonstrates integrity, transparency, inclusion and appreciates the talent of our staff, a philosophy leading to field-driven solutions.

We value excellent service delivery that is guided by regulation and compliance standards (**compliance**).

We value transparent, strategic use of

available resources and maximizing all funding opportunities (**budget**).

As we were leaving, Jim Stephens of CVIOG produced a document created by Georgia VR in the mid-1980s. With a quick review, it was discovered that many of the written themes almost mirrored our newly created values. Although the verbiage was slightly different, the intent and purpose has not changed in more than 30 years!

At the same time, the only constant at GVRA has been change based on my experience. People change, organizational charts change, systems change, policies change, office locations change and clients change. Many of you have personally watched processes introduced, revamped, rescinded and then readopted in fairly short periods of time. WIOA has dramatically impacted a number of our decisions and the way we will engage clients. Georgia is a vibrant state, and the number of potential clients continue to increase on a daily basis.

With all that said, there is profound truth in the simplicity of the culture we must all strive to create here at GVRA. Our mission is employment and independence for Georgians with disabilities. Our vision? That everyone can work. Those principles are among the most noble in the public sector. Our people are our most valuable resource. The most important thing is the client/claimant. The only reason the administrative offices at 200 Piedmont exist is to support the programs. There is an urgency to our purpose, which should be matched by urgency in every task we undertake, no matter how small, and no matter what changes we see, this will remain the same.





# Remembering Tom Henderson

## The Longtime GIB Engineer Will Be Missed

Longtime Georgia Industries for the Blind Research and Development Engineer Tom Henderson passed away in late March, and the entire GVRA organization mourns with his friends and family.

"He was a great guy to work with. He was very knowledgeable and dependable. You could count on him to do what needed to be done, and he did it all with a good sense of humor," said GIB Operations Manager Mike Jackson. "He will most definitely be missed."

He is survived by his wife, his son, his daughter and five grandchildren.



## Your Information. Your Newsletter.

By Communications Manager John Boan

First of all, thank you for taking the time to read this issue of the GVRA monthly newsletter. It's one of multiple communication channels we use to share the good word of GVRA, and it wouldn't be possible without the contributions of so many.

That said, this newsletter belongs to the taxpayers and to you—the readers. It

continues to grow and expand, but we want to hear about how we can improve it and make it even better.

If there's ever anything you'd like included, please email me at [John.Boan@gvs.ga.gov](mailto:John.Boan@gvs.ga.gov).

Thanks again for reading. See you next month.

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